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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000072

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SUBJECT: FIJI UPDATE, JANUARY 29, 2007: EPG MEETINGS START;
BAINIMARAMA BLAMES NGOS FOR STATE OF EMERGENCY; SPORTS HERO
LEERY OF INTERIM GOVERNMENT APPOINTMENT

REF: SUVA 068 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Charge Ted Mann per 1.5 (B) and (D)

Summary

11. (C) The Pacific Island Forum's Eminent Persons Group began its meetings in Fiji today. Interim PM Bainimarama called his meeting with the EPG useful, saying the group understands "there is no turning back." Bainimarama took another strong swipe at NGO activists, accusing them of poisoning the views of Australia, New Zealand and other countries. Only because of NGOs, he said, are checkpoints still in place. The interim government advertised permanent secretary vacancies in major newspapers. Fiji's foreign

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investment chief told us she is looking to emigrate. Sports hero Waisele Serevi insists he has not agreed to accept an appointment to a new government sports board, apparently because of concerns about possible visa restrictions. End Summary.

Eminent Persons Group Visit Kicks Off

12. (U) The EPG met with interim PM Bainimarama, President Iloilo, lawyer Richard Naidu and others 1/29. The EPG was scheduled to meet with former VP Ratu Jone Madraiwiwi late in the day. Bainimarama told reporters his meeting with the EPG was useful; the EPG knows, he said, there is no turning back. EPG members made no comments to the press. That would wait, they said, until the end of the week-long visit. The press statement issued by the embassy which stated that the U.S. supports the visit of the EPG as part of efforts to encourage the swift restoration of democracy received considerable airplay.

Bainimarama Says Elections in "3,4 or 5 Years"

13. (U) Speaking on a Fijian language "talk-back" show over the weekend, Bainimarama said the military-appointed interim government is likely to rule for "three, four or five years." The up-to-five-year timeframe noted by the Commodore is consistent with a statement made last week by the Secretary of the President's Office, who said the interim regime would remain in place up to five years.

Bainimarama Says NGOs to Blame for State of Emergency,
"Incorrect" Foreign Government Views

14. (U) In the same talk-back program, Bainimarama said military checkpoints remain in place because of "inciteful" comments from some NGOs. Bainimarama said he cannot

understand why these NGOs continue to speak out against the interim government, but assumes they are trying to impress their foreign donors. Switching to English, the Commander said the "incorrect" views of Australia, New Zealand and other foreign countries is due to misinformation from the NGOs. "That's one reason the RFMF is really pissed off at the NGOs." Bainimarama reiterated that those who speak out against the government and military will be brought to the military camp for questioning. NGO activists Laisa Digitaki and Angie Heffernan remain in hiding from the military, which has sought to bring them to the camp since early last week.

Interim Government Advertises Permanent Secretary Jobs

15. (SBU) Fiji's Public Service Commission put out ads in Fiji's daily newspapers today, inviting applications to Permanent Secretary positions in government ministries. Salaries are advertised at FJ\$74,000 to FJ\$96,000 (USD 44,000-58,000) plus benefits. While the advertisements stated that current ministry CEOs are welcome to apply, former Ministry of Commerce CEO Sereli Koyamaibole told us the military "has people in mind" for all the jobs. Koyamaibole, who is now looking to start his own business in the private sector, complained to the media that he had not yet received his final paycheck.

Investment Chief on Her Way Out

16. (C) The respected head of the Fiji Trade and Investment Board (FTIB), Lailun Khan, told us she is seeking to emigrate to New Zealand as soon as possible (she apparently has re-activated an earlier application). Khan said she has been in constant contact with the military over the past few weeks over foreign investment related issues and "is sick of all this." Khan's comments about military interference appear to refer to a new "Project Facilitation Committee" she

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announced 1/29. The Committee, formed after a directive from Interim PM Bainimarama, is comprised of representatives from the PM's office, the Ministry of Lands, Ministry of Tourism, Reserve Bank and several other government departments. In her press statement, Khan said the Committee "will ensure that all hurdles are ironed out for investors to complete their projects on time." Her unguarded comments to us indicate her real views are quite different. (Comment: The departure of Khan and her husband, the head of the Fiji Muslim Association, would be a real loss for Fiji. Unfortunately the emigration of many of Fiji's best and brightest seems inevitable. End comment.)

Serevi Worried About Visa Bans After Sports Council Appointment

17. (U) Waisale Serevi, the player/coach of Fiji's world champion 7s rugby team, expressed surprise 1/27 that he had been named a Fiji Sports Council member by the interim government. Serevi, undoubtedly the most popular sports figure in Fiji (golfer VJ Singh might be a distant second or third), immediately distanced himself from the appointment, saying he was not consulted. Serevi told reporters he was worried about visa restrictions imposed by Australia, New Zealand and other countries. Serevi said he would make a decision only after the 7s team completes upcoming tournaments in Wellington and San Diego.

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